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Summary

- Chinese foreign manipulation and interference activities are growing in Europe.
- China's interest in strengthening political and economic ties in central and eastern Europe in the 2010s generated alarm. But, rather than being a "Trojan horse", this part of Europe is now something of a defensive vanguard: it offers extensive examples of the approaches Beijing may adopt elsewhere in Europe.
- A "playbook" of these information operations is now identifiable. It includes methods such as "borrowing mouths" of European influencers to lend credibility to Chinese messaging, "laundering" information, and otherwise obscuring the origin and attribution of China-derived content.
- Key messages include China's "peaceful rise", its intense modernity and support for Russian foreign policy positions.
- If left unchecked, these methods and messages could further corrode Europe's information environment, undermining democratic resilience. Chinese AI tools also appear to push the same ideas.
- European decision-makers should help their populations become more "China-literate" to be alert to such operations. They should also consider how they can counter them directly.

Tools of influence

The scale and intensity of Chinese interference in Europe's information space is rising.

Russian efforts at foreign manipulation across Europe are well recognised,[1] but China is now catching up. And it has its own very particular ways of interfering in the European information space – "borrowing mouths" of useful locals; getting "news" articles repurposed across outlets hungry for content; and spreading "facts" that become accepted as truth. These accompany China's self-promotion as the inevitable coming power: images of Chinese high-speed rail and new cities interweave with messages casting doubt on the future of Western democracy and progress.

Over a decade ago, alarm bells began to sound at Beijing's growing ties with political and business elites in central and eastern Europe, which it pursued through platforms such as the "16+1". In response, academics and experts in the region began to map Chinese foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).[2] This policy brief draws on the work carried out over the last ten years and describes the types of approach adopted in Chinese FIMI, the actors involved, the behaviours they exhibit, the content they promote, the audiences they target and the effects these activities generate. The paper argues that Beijing possesses a coherent influence toolkit which it is able to use in different countries. Many people in central and eastern Europe – in think-tanks, among academics and some politicians – are well versed in the nature, scale and impact of Chinese FIMI. It is now possible to understand China's FIMI playbook, which it may also be using in other parts of Europe.

The international chaos unleashed by President Donald Trump during his second term has created a temptation across European capitals to look at China more favourably. But Beijing's policies have not changed, and most of its strategic choices remain detrimental[3] to European security and prosperity. China's sustained economic and diplomatic support for Russia is a case in point, as are the impacts of Beijing's industrial policy (overcapacity[4] in particular) and the Chinese threat to Europe's remaining industrial base. Learning from the experience of Chinese FIMI in central and eastern Europe can help European decision-makers mount an EU-wide response to the subtle but determined challenge they face from China in these fundamental areas.

The origins of Chinese foreign manipulation and interference

In 2012, China launched a platform[5] for cooperation with central and eastern European countries that came to be dubbed the "16+1". This prompted some western European and American commentators to deem the region a "Chinese Trojan horse"[6] willing to accept Beijing's gifts and vulnerable to its seductive messaging.

The "16+1" failed[7] to match the hopes initially burnished by governments and others in the region, either economically or politically. However, it did leave one, ironic, legacy: what might have been a "Trojan horse" has turned out to be Europe's defensive vanguard. China's newfound attentiveness to central and eastern Europe – and Western, especially American, reaction – sparked original research into Chinese information manipulation and interference. ("FIMI" refers to the wide range of tactics used by third parties to influence others for strategic gain. It is the EU's favoured term,[8] as opposed to "disinformation".)

Initiatives in this area included MapInfluenCE[9] (authors of this text have been part of this project; Ivana Karásková is the founder of this initiative) which carries out research into Chinese FIMI. China's influence efforts[10] in central and eastern Europe have thus become increasingly well documented. A clearer picture has emerged of hybrid tactics, elite capture and economic "sticks and carrots",[11] as well as the intersection with Russian influence. Central and eastern Europe now boasts a closely knit array[12] of experts, and knowledge of Beijing's discourse power and public perceptions[13] in the region is only improving. That being said, the central and eastern European China policy community is still relatively insulated from other policy communities in Europe, and opportunities for knowledge-sharing across thematic areas remain under-developed. But their insights can already pave the way for stronger "China literacy" in Europe – including recognising and naming influence efforts when they are under way – a necessary skill to build resilience against Chinese FIMI.

Europe today is in a hybrid warfare[14] environment, with the information domain one of the most critical realms. External powers relentlessly attempt to exert influence and promote narratives to shape[15] the conditions under which European governments and societies operate and make decisions. While Russia usually still attracts the lion's share of public attention, China is increasingly active and capable. Its FIMI activity is firmly rooted in domestic thinking and practice, but is now finding increasingly powerful external expression.

Discourse power and "telling China's story well"

Chinese FIMI is underpinned by two foundational ideas present in the thinking of Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

The first idea is a "holistic approach"[16] to national security, which expands the notion of security far beyond that of territorial defence to incorporate questions of political stability, cultural and social cohesion, technological innovation and public sentiment. Battles of narratives and ideologies across these domains are part of defending and building this holistic security.

The second idea is that the world is undergoing "great changes unseen in a century",[17] which refers to significant transformations taking place in the international order that could either accelerate China's rise or bring the country down, as previously occurred during the traumatic "century of national humiliation".[18] For Xi, this may be a time of existential importance for China that demands greater ideological assertiveness and control over how China is perceived globally. Building and maintaining discourse power is now a strategic objective[19] promoted by Chinese authorities.

Overlaying this is the Chinese concept of "discourse power",[20] which is at the heart of China's shift towards political assertiveness, influence-spreading activities and increased self-confidence in the international arena. Xi believes[21] China's material power will remain constrained by Western (predominantly American) interpretations and norms unless it is able to bend global narratives about China and broader international affairs more to its own liking. More concretely, possessing discourse power means being able to reduce international criticism of China, dissuade other countries from aligning against China, and win support for China's political model and global policies. And, in another of his signature phrases, Xi has made a call to "tell China's story well".[22] This effectively means that all those who carry a message about China – from state officials to online influencers – must present the country in the best possible light.

To create discourse power, China is investing in its capacity[23] to influence discussions on topics ranging from international development[24] and mediation[25] to technology,[26] AI,[27] global governance[28] and, importantly for central and eastern Europe, the war in Ukraine.[29]

China's external propaganda efforts are not built from scratch. They are an extension of a longstanding domestic propaganda system that has been modernised and centralised under Xi. Over the past decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tightened[30] its control over information flows inside and outside China, reshaping[31] the media landscape, regulating[32] digital platforms and further reinforcing[33] ideological discipline across all available information sources. This domestic system is run[34] through a set of powerful bodies, including the Central Leading Group for Propaganda, Ideological and Cultural Work, the Central Propaganda Department, and the Cyberspace

Administration of China. These entities coordinate messaging and shape the boundaries of what is permissible in public debate. They are complemented[35] by certain university networks and state-established "international communication centres", which coordinate China's broader messaging. Together, these guide China's external propaganda strategy. Beijing's international messaging thus mirrors[36] the structure, content and objectives of its domestic information governance.

In terms of message, common refrains include promoting the idea of China as a neutral[37] and peaceful[38] power; warning others to steer clear of Taiwan-related[39] issues; and discrediting and undermining[40] America. These all reflect the CCP's domestically focused messaging and propaganda, but adapted for foreign audiences.

Other important ideas in Chinese FIMI include hailing the country's role in driving economic and technological progress and reshaping the international system to make it more "democratic". But there is also a deeper ambition: to promote China's political model, development path and strategic intentions as credible, legitimate and widely accepted. Crucially, the objective is not to silence all criticism but to shape the discursive environment in such a way that China's preferred narratives appear objective and reasonable. Critical perspectives are to seem uninformed, biased or ideologically motivated.

The new playbook

After slowly integrating into the Western-led international order in the 1990s, China focused[41] on building discreet connections with elite circles and industry stakeholders in different countries, as well as with fringe and mainstream political actors. Its traditional influence toolkit also includes other fairly conspicuous methods: direct media acquisitions, paid content placements and media partnerships[42] as well as diplomats and state media relaying official lines. China still uses such methods, although their success is questionable: explicit pro-Chinese messaging still does not dominate[43] public debate in most EU member states, including in central and eastern Europe.

However, China's efforts today are about shaping public opinion at scale. In a wider casting of the net, Chinese FIMI now relies on a busy ecosystem of other actors. For example, Beijing uses[44] research partnerships, business associations, cultural exchanges, diaspora networks and social media influencers – who may or may not recognise their role in communicating CCP narratives. These locally based people and organisations (such as, for example, a Polish influencer talking to Polish audiences) provide familiar cultural and linguistic references and possess legitimacy that Chinese authorities lack. They help embed Beijing's narratives into debates that, at first glance, may seem unrelated to China, such as the future of European industrial policy, global governance or the economy.

The underlying logic runs as follows: influence the wider information environment first, allow preferred narratives to become familiar and "common sense" in everyday online discourse and then let those narratives travel – with the help of local intermediaries – into mainstream media agendas[45] and, eventually, national politics.

Stuck in a propaganda rut

In the mid-to-late 2010s, "traditional" Chinese propaganda in Europe appears to have taken on a sharper edge, likely because of the changing geopolitical situation during the first Trump presidency and growing scepticism of China's motives in Europe. For example, in Poland, Huawei was excluded from the construction of 5G networks in 2019. This led the then Chinese ambassador, Liu Guangyuan, and his American counterpart, Georgette Mosbacher, to engage[46] in a heated "op-ed war" in Polish media. The same dynamic continued during the covid pandemic when the same ambassador blamed[47] America for the spread of the virus. Similarly, in the Czech Republic, Chinese actors' behaviour on social media intensified considerably after 2019, when protests in Hong Kong catalysed[48] a coordinated media push by Beijing to delegitimise the pro-democracy movements. Around this time, research suggests that China had begun drawing inspiration from other actors; it warned of a new "Russianization"[49] of Chinese operations.

Over the past decade, key channels of Chinese FIMI dissemination in Poland and the Czech Republic have included op-eds and interviews[50] with Chinese diplomats in local media and the dissemination of Beijing-backed narratives through various cooperation mechanisms with local media (such as content-sharing agreements and outreach to journalists with invitations[51] for all-expenses-paid trips to China). They have also included digital activities undertaken by Chinese state-affiliated media. Most notable are China Radio International (CRI) Poland[52] and the Czech Republic,[53] which are active on Facebook,[54] with over 420,000 followers in Poland and a staggering 1 million followers[55] in the Czech Republic – a country with a population of less than 11 million people.

Historically, Beijing-backed narratives disseminated by Chinese actors in central and eastern Europe often appeared crude or mismatched for local audiences. Despite the increased sophistication of Chinese FIMI in the 2020s, China-affiliated entities still produce this sort of material: badly edited, full of CCP newspeak and reminiscent of the pre-1989 discourse prevalent across central and eastern Europe countries. Outlets such as CRI[56] amplify narratives in line with Chinese authorities' key strategic interests, but the content is often still unimpressive. For example, strongly anti-American satirical cartoons posted[57] by CRI Poland on Facebook are unlikely to find a ready audience among Poles. "It seems that the PRC would like to get rid of Eastern European countries for its own benefit, as it criticizes NATO's efforts to keep these countries sovereign", remarked one commenter. This type of content was especially common around the time of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which Chinese media portrayed as a proxy war,[58] downplaying the agency of Ukrainians and diminishing their role to mere "puppets" in the hands of Americans.

Getting out of the rut: Five ways to blur attribution

That being said, China appears to have begun to use additional methods in around 2019, and ramped this up with the coming of the covid pandemic.[59] The old habits are hard to break, but Beijing's FIMI is now increasingly defined by new methods which aim to convey Chinese messaging without a clear Chinese branding – blurring attribution. There is greater use of techniques that include: "borrowing mouths", "bait and switch", "laundering", "cloaking" and "amplification". At the same time, the emphasis has moved decisively towards newer media, especially social media platforms.

BORROWING MOUTHS

In recent years Beijing has invested heavily in "borrowing mouths"[60] – using figures local to their own countries to legitimise China's perspectives on key issues and render them more palatable to domestic audiences. These people act, whether consciously or unconsciously, as intermediaries between local societies and the Chinese party-state. For example, during the covid pandemic, Chinese state-affiliated actors used[61] these social media accounts more assertively. The CRI account in the Czech Republic pursued the strategy of "borrowing mouths to speak"[62] and offered €20 to Czech and Slovak students of Chinese to record[63] prescribed-slogan videos to support the Chinese fight against the pandemic.

Social media influencers are especially important. Generic China-friendly content is increasingly supported by tailored takes from content creators who travel to China. According to investigative reports[64] by the New York Times, state-run media and local governments fund influencers' trips and the creators themselves. These media and related social media accounts then share the creators' videos to millions of people on YouTube, X and Facebook. Even if influencers are acting unwittingly, Beijing makes use of them: diplomats promote their content, with the top six influencers gaining more than 130m YouTube views and 1.1m subscribers in 2021. These "useful influencers"[65] are not always necessarily paid by Beijing, but they receive favours and benefits such as better access[66] to areas where authorities have restricted foreign journalists' reporting. Some even gain a measure of fame in China. In both Poland and the Czech Republic, the visibility of this kind of China-friendly content has grown, with videos about China's newfound technological might[67] appearing to gain the most traction.

Well-documented cases[68] of content made by non-Chinese social media influencers include videos that present a positive image of Xinjiang, where China has systematically suppressed[69] the local Muslim population. Such videos have found their way to a YouTube profile[70] of a local Polish radio station that appears to cooperate[71] with CRI

Poland and CGTN Poland[72] – part of China's main national broadcaster – in sharing and co-creating[73] content. The series of Xinjiang travelogues[74] parrots major talking points of Chinese authorities, such as the region's supposed social harmony, religious freedom and supposed contentedness of ethnic minorities. Chinese party-state media workers and diplomats would then share or post this content online.

In the Czech context, TikToker Jan Michalek's CRI-sponsored trip to Xinjiang[75] in 2024 serves as a particularly illustrative example. The type of curated access permitted to Michalek enables CRI to control what creators can see and film in China, whom they meet and what story emerges. To viewers, however, the result still looks like independent testimony from a familiar personality rather than organised messaging.

In a similar vein, the multi-week China trip of IShowSpeed – one of the world's most famous streamers – in spring 2025 was a soft power win[76] for Beijing. Videos of his time in China have racked up[77] millions of views, most notably his content made in Chongqing, the most "viral" Chinese city,[78] known for its cyberpunk vibe and surreal infrastructure. The Chinese authorities did not organise his trip, but IShowSpeed's social media was amplified[79] by state-affiliated media keen to instrumentalise him as an example of the need for mutual understanding between America and China. Numerous influencers have since followed in his footsteps. PatecWariatec is one of Poland's most popular content creators, especially among young people. In early 2026 he released a series of China videos,[80] explicitly mentioning IShowSpeed as an inspiration. Slowly but surely, China is now becoming a "place to go". Content focuses on food, culture and tech – and goes nowhere near questions of politics or society.

BAIT AND SWITCH

Examining CRI's outreach[81] to Czech TikTok creators reveals a bait-and-switch mechanism at play. CRI first builds reach and trust through seemingly harmless channels. Once it has achieved this, it uses that credibility to amplify preferred narratives. Instead of leading with overt propaganda, the content is often framed as lifestyle and culture – travel, crafts, food and "everyday life" – which avoids the risk of generating audience scepticism and makes accounts easier to grow. In the Czech Republic, a large group of influencers was hired in 2023 to record "reaction videos"[82] to posts from two TikTok accounts belonging to "Pepa" Zhang and "Lada" Wang. These characters, portrayed as Czech-speaking fans of Chinese culture, were in fact employees of CRI. The initiative was implemented in parallel in Poland and Greece, with its visual branding tailored to each national context to increase local appeal – using a young bull in Poland and an owl in Greece. In Poland, a similar effort[83] was organised in November 2022 by a Chinese coordinator, Oliwia Waskocha, who is fluent in Polish and enlisted a substantial number of local influencers. Taken together, the influencers involved have nearly 7m[84] TikTok followers.

The next step is to borrow legitimacy from local creators. Chinese outlets pay influencers to react to, repost or otherwise engage with the target accounts, which makes the CRI-linked accounts look authentic and locally relevant. Generous fees – often above usual local rates[85] – help secure cooperation quickly. Meanwhile, unusually

high view counts can indicate additional paid boosting that accelerates visibility. In practice, the purpose is not the cultural content itself, but the creation of a trusted distribution channel that can later carry more strategic messaging.

LAUNDERING

In the Czech Republic, CRI created an ecosystem[86] of information laundering. Methods of information laundering include, for example, publishing an article on a CRI site in a form that does not prominently foreground authorship or sponsorship. The next step sees Czech "alternative" outlets republish the same article, where it is presented as the outlet's own work or attributed to a local author.[87] For Czech readers, the piece then appears to be domestically produced journalism; only direct comparison with the original CRI version can reveal its Chinese origin. This pattern was documented,[88] for instance, in August 2022, when parts of the Czech alternative media scene published – under their own bylines – the full wording of a statement issued by the Chinese embassy in Prague in response to the visit to Taiwan of the then Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi.

CLOAKING

Cloaking is when someone hides who is really behind a message by making it look like it comes from a trusted, mainstream outlet. Unlike laundering – which is about a message spreading step by step through different channels until it seems "clean" and credible – cloaking is mainly about disguising the source from the very start.

For example, between 2019 and 2023, the Czech commercial rock station Radio HEY aired a programme titled Barevný svět ("Colourful World"), a 30-minute segment broadcast six times a week in early evening slots. It aired more than 1,000 episodes before a discourse analysis[89] revealed that the episodes were in fact produced by CRI.[90] The programme was quietly discontinued.

AMPLIFICATION

Amplification is a further approach, which leverages ideologically polarised domestic actors. An outlet such as CRI shares and promotes content from marginal far-left or hard-right movements[91] when these voices express approval of China or challenge, for example, the Czech Republic's pro-Western orientation. These groups, in turn, recycle CRI material across their own platforms, helping to normalise and further disseminate Chinese narratives within niche communities. Over the past five years, this strategy has started to appear more often in Europe and is now part of the Chinese playbook, similar to Russian information operations practices.

The playbook's messages

In 2026, Trump seems like the ultimate wrecker of the rules-based global order. But America's retreat from its longstanding role in Europe has created a misleading imbalance. It has flipped perceptions in public debates: Beijing might now appear far more predictable – and thus more appealing as a partner – than Washington. Mark Carney's recent trip to China is a case in point. The Canadian prime minister portrayed China as a reliable collaborator with "extensive common interests and opportunities"[92] and praised the country's economic growth and innovation. Further "resets" have followed, including visits by British prime minister Keir Starmer and, most recently, German chancellor Friedrich Merz. Yet Beijing's actions and policies are fundamentally at odds with Europe's interests on issues like the war in Ukraine. Chinese FIMI promotes China while quietly supporting Russian messaging.

HELPING RUSSIA ONLINE

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Chinese FIMI in central and eastern Europe spiked,[93] framing Russia's invasion from the outset as a crisis provoked by America, NATO and "the West". It used[94] Kremlin terminology such as "special military operation" and spread[95] the false narrative of US biolabs in Ukraine. Studies[96] of online posts sent by Chinese diplomats and state media in spring 2022 confirm systematic blame-shifting and the grafting of covid-era conspiracy tropes onto Ukraine content. This blending helped launder a debunked Russian claim[97] through Chinese outlets with global reach. One policy paper (co-written by two of this paper's authors) mapped nine central and eastern European countries and likewise found embassies and state media repeatedly advancing[98] storylines of Western responsibility, calling for "balance" and moral equivalence, and avoiding direct condemnation of Moscow.

WELCOMING CHINA'S RISE

In the last year, Polish and Czech social media have been flooded[99] with images of ultra-modern China, with landscapes dominated by towering skyscrapers, neon lights, high-speed trains, robots, autonomous vehicles and high-tech production sites. These images are not explicitly about criticising Europe. Instead, their main objective is to convince the public that "the future is Chinese"[100] and that the West is in a state of ultimate decline.

Certain themes appear repeatedly in these messages: millions lifted out of poverty; the world's best manufacturer; number one in technology patents; the third space power, to name just a few. And visually stunning examples prevail: the world's larg-

est cargo ship[101] used for transporting Chinese electric vehicles to Europe, a floating bridge,[102] the world's tallest bridge,[103] a system to enable trains to travel at 1,000km an hour,[104] and "the death of German and European dominance in the automotive industry",[105] with BYD's Yangwang U9 model accelerating to a speed of 471km an hour and breaking the world record for the fastest mass-production car. Equal and opposite narratives about Europe abound. For example, in late 2025 the idea of the EU as overly bureaucratic and ineffective was picked up by Konrad Berkowicz, a right-wing Polish MP, who forwarded a video[106] allegedly showing China's new electromagnetic cannon, which is able to shoot seven times faster than the speed of sound. This was accompanied by a comment that "meanwhile, we in the EU have screw-on bottle caps, immigrants and single-sex marriages". Although fact-checking organisations found[107] the video to be AI-generated, its popularity testified to the receptiveness of some segments of Polish society to this kind of narrative.

AI

AI is helping China strengthen its "discourse power". A report by Estonian Foreign Intelligence[108] services concluded that China seeks to instil a distorted, self-serving world view in the Western information space. Chinese AI system DeepSeek is a major tool in this effort. The report found that DeepSeek hides key information and injects Chinese propaganda into its answers about Estonian security. Contrary to conventional wisdom, these distortions are not only limited to highly sensitive topics such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan or human rights-related issues, but also to events and processes closer to home in Europe. DeepSeek also appears to use Chinese official positions as an objective reading of a situation: when asked about the war in Ukraine, for example, it stressed China's neutral stance and the country's professed aim to contribute positively to a political resolution.

What China's new playbook means for Europe

Chinese FIMI in Poland and the Czech Republic follows a well-established pattern: it serves primarily to strengthen China's positive image, weaken the image of Beijing's enemies – most notably America and NATO – and undermine democratic societies by promoting the alleged superiority of China's political system. Many goals of Chinese FIMI are convergent with Russia's, for example by undermining[109] the credibility of NATO, blaming[110] NATO for the war in Ukraine and aligning[111] with Moscow on the politics of memory of the second world war, where it portrays China and Russia as the primary victors against fascism.

Subtle attribution-blurring techniques are now common. Traditional instruments – state media messaging, diplomats' interventions, paid placements, media partnerships and elite outreach – remain in use. But they are now increasingly complemented by: "borrowing mouths", with local influencers, commentators and intermediaries lending domestic credibility to Beijing-linked narratives; bait and switch, which draws people towards seemingly innocuous accounts, which later start pushing Chinese messages; laundering, through which China-origin content is republished until it appears to be locally produced; cloaking, which disguises Chinese sponsorship or authorship from the outset; and amplification, in which Chinese actors boost domestic voices already sympathetic to their positions. Together, these techniques render Chinese messaging less visible as foreign influence while helping it resonate in European debates.

Limited awareness of these methods among Europeans only eases Beijing's reach. When China-friendly messages – along with frequent media-perpetuated narratives of the decline of the EU – are articulated by influential voices, they gain credibility and legitimacy[112] among the European public. This can extend China's discursive influence far beyond that which Beijing could achieve through official channels alone. Chinese messaging risks becoming deeply embedded in European political, societal and media environments, shaping perceptions even when China officially remains largely invisible.

HOW TO UNCLOAK CHINA'S METHODS

The main challenge for Europe is the limited attention paid to Chinese propaganda and disinformation by policymakers – and the consequent weak understanding among governments, agencies, media and the public about its inner workings. A handful of think-tanks and civil society organisations conduct systematic, long-term analysis of China's influence. These include the Association for International Affairs, Sinopsis, and the European Values Center for Security Policy in the Czech Republic and CEIAS

in Slovakia. Others contribute more intermittently through relevant research and commentary, including IRSEM in France, MERICS in Germany and Political Capital in Hungary. At the EU level, awareness-raising and analytical work is undertaken by EUvsDisinfo and the European External Action Services (EEAS) StratCom teams, as reflected, for instance, in the third cumulative report on FIMI[113] published by the EEAS.

Yet, in comparison with the resources and visibility devoted to Russian propaganda and disinformation – evident in the team sizes and the volume of EEAS output – China-focused efforts remain relatively marginal in Europe's broader resilience agenda. Resilience against Chinese influence largely depends on whether domestic environments – media markets, local politics, platform dynamics, transparency rules and the level of societal resilience – allow Chinese narratives to be normalised through local intermediaries. For Europe-wide resilience, this means prioritising "China literacy" as a practical competency: recognising "borrowing mouths", bait and switch, laundering, cloaking and amplification.

The second challenge is strategic. European approaches to hybrid threats have been shaped above all by Russia, which was first to systematically push its narratives into modern European information spaces. Geographic proximity and Russia's war against Ukraine – including from 2014 onward – further reinforced a policy and analytical lens geared towards monitoring high-volume, fast-moving disinformation campaigns that were often easily attributable to Russian sources. With Chinese FIMI, Europeans will need to devise a different model of resilience. As this paper has shown, Beijing's approach tends to be more cumulative: it is designed to gradually shift the boundaries of what feels reasonable, modern, inevitable or pragmatic – often through content that appears cultural, commercial or apolitical, and carried by messengers who seem local and credible. This makes it easy to underestimate until it is embedded in mainstream frames.

The most effective response, therefore, is to address the structural enablers: the European Commission, on behalf of member states, should enforce existing disclosure rules for sponsored media and influencer collaborations; social media platforms should strengthen monitoring of coordinated amplification and attribution-masking; platforms should improve their transparency and expand research access. Alongside this, member state institutions tasked with countering hybrid threats should invest in communication capacity that can compete in the spaces where narratives spread. If they abstain from platforms such as TikTok – often while simultaneously warning citizens about the associated security risks of installing the application – they may inadvertently cede that space to malign actors. Put simply, Europe's vulnerability is shaped as much by its own information governance gaps as by Beijing's activity. Closing those gaps will determine whether bottom-up influence remains marginal or becomes strategically consequential.

Chinese FIMI efforts in Europe are becoming increasingly innovative. They will not transform societies and political systems overnight. But they have the potential to slowly influence how European policymakers perceive China, how the public understands certain global developments and how Europeans debate their own strategic priorities. Such messaging may contribute to further hesitation and fragmentation among European political leaders and other decision-makers. When Chinese

talking points circulate widely, they can create ambiguity about China's intentions. Combined with Beijing's economic and trade leverage, they could weaken support among European governments for more assertive policy responses. They may also erode European societies' confidence in the EU's economic strength, political leverage and collective capacity to act.

To avert this scenario, the EU and European states must move beyond a narrowly reactive approach and actively invest in creating credible, forward-looking European narratives, along with the mechanisms to deliver them. They need to counter individual activities and debunk specific narratives, including Chinese narratives. But this will not enough on its own. In the end, influence campaigns succeed not because individual claims go unchallenged in a given moment, but because they consistently fill narrative vacuums over longer periods of time.

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About CHOICE

The publication was prepared within the China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) collaborative platform. CHOICE is a think net of China experts providing informed analysis on the rising influence of the People's Republic of China within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. It is the largest network of China experts in the Central and Eastern European region, with more than 240 contributors from 30 different countries.

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